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Yoga Diva

She was lithe in ways I would never be. While the rest of the class tottered on our bellies in bow, arms and legs extending from worn t-shirts and faded sweatpants, she arched skyward in a black velour unitard, an unbroken, graceful line. And as we grunted our way into handstands, toppling over like children's blocks, she noiselessly sprang heavenward.

The class was very small, eight or ten of us in the upstairs bedroom of an old house. Unlike larger classes I'd attended, it was hard not to notice everyone's strengths and weaknesses. When I'd started yoga two years earlier, I'd found this to be one its unexpected virtues: discovering a body's hidden talents. Camel pose was an easy thing for me; grabbing my ankles, my head tipped back, I could take in the room while my neighbors teetered. But during warrior, my muscles quivered as the potbellied man next to me settled into a taut, still place.

The old swimmer in me, focused on lowering a time and doing ever more laps, could never get it through her mind that yoga is not a competitive sport. I always an eye turned sideways at my fellow students, taking stock, pushing myself further. Standing next to near perfection didn't help this habit.

Unlike the rest of us, Alex had no recognizable weaknesses. I'd learned her name because our teacher often gave her more advanced poses after starting the rest of us on a simple task. As we settled into downward dog, trying to pin our sitting bones to the sky, they quietly considered feats rarely performed outside the Himalayas: "Alex, how about crane-flying-over-water?"

It was like doing laps with an Olympian. Her beauty—wavy blonde hair, pale skin, and a heart shaped mouth—only threatened me more. In private, I took to calling her the “Yoga Diva,” rolling my eyes while describing one of her gravity-challenging feats to my husband, my awe camouflaged by disgust.

Several years later, after I'd changed yoga instructors and long forgotten Alex, I took a prenatal class while visiting Los Angeles. I was near the end of my second trimester and already felt impossibly large and ungainly. I'd been doing yoga on my own all winter, one of my few activities in the midst of an especially icy, cold Iowa winter. The class, filled with 40 pregnant women, was a wonderful revelation after having hibernated alone. Just the sight of my classmates' bellies, some of which hardly swelled yet and others full as moons, made me relax into a sense of community.

Just as class began, two women squeezed into spaces in front of and next to me. I felt a silly jolt when I recognized one of them to be an actress from a television show I watch. The character she played was indeed pregnant, but here she melted into the gestating crowd, only her British accent giving her away. Her sweatpants rode low on her hips, and I could see her underwear band. Jockey. Just like mine.

The woman next to me looked familiar too, but I couldn't come up with a Hollywood association. In the sea of spandex, she was wearing a soft, worn wool shirt that made her look as though she should be sipping tea, a book in her lap. Her pale skin was flushed with the pigmentation of late pregnancy. When the teacher asked us to go around the room and introduce ourselves, she was last: "My name is Alex." I turned hard. What were the possibilities that two women who had shared a small yogi space in Iowa would end up side by side in L.A.? Gone was the black cat suit and her face was a bit fuller, but indeed it was the diva.

During partner poses, Alex guided me through new positions and cheered my progress. At first, I wondered at the change in her, but then realized we'd never spoken before. Most of what I knew about her was in my head, the conclusions of a dogged, blind competitor. It was I who had changed, finally settling into yoga's flow, the rhythm of my body, its needs and strengths. In this room of resplendent bellies, I saw Alex for the calm, focused, and very pregnant woman she was just then. As she took my hand for balance, I asked when she was due. A smile spread across her rosy lips. "Today."